

PEARSON ISLAND EXPEDITION 1969. — 6. BIRDS

by JOAN B. PATON*

Summary

An annotated list is given of the twenty-seven species of birds recorded on the Pearson Islands by the expedition of January 1969. A tabulated list of all records of birds from the islands is also given.

Introduction

In the only work published hitherto on the birds of the Pearson Islands, Cleland (1923) has pointed out that the main interest lies in the land birds and whether they are indigenous, chance vagrants, or regular migrants. If they are indigenous, it is possible there are significant differences from the corresponding mainland species.

Thirty-three species of birds have now been recorded from the Pearson Islands. This list is not likely to be complete as records are available only for five visits—by E. R. Waite (Sept. 1914), F. Wood Jones (Nov. 1920), J. B. Cleland (Jan. 1923), in Jan. 1960, and the 1969 expedition.

With the exception of the Raven (*Corvus coronoides*) which Cleland (1923) said "occupied a nest", no land birds have been found breeding. This is not surprising because most visits have been short and mainly in the summer at the conclusion of the nesting season of many species.

The geomorphology of the Pearson Islands, including a locality map, is described by Twidale (1971) in this volume of the Transactions.

Annotated Systematic List

Endiptyula minor (Forster). *Little Penguin*

These were seen on all the Pearson Islands. Some were found in burrows near the top of East Hill, more than 150 m above sea-level. There seems no obvious reason why these birds should seek shelter involving such an arduous climb.

On several sloping granite faces on the Islands, there are long, nearly square-sectioned, gutters of varying size (usually about 20-30 cm deep and about 50 cm wide) which clearly carry penguin excreta downhill. The chemical action of the excreta, aided by the wear and

tear of many penguins walking up and down them, could be an important factor in the formation of these *granitillen*. Similar gutters have not yet been recorded from other granitic islands inhabited by penguins.

Pelagodroma marina (Latham). *White-faced Storm-Petrel*

Wings of at least ten of these birds were found in front of small burrows on Dorothee. There was no sign of head, body or legs. These had presumably been eaten by an avian predator such as the Sea-Eagle or by the Pearson Island Rat (*Rattus fuscipes*) if present. Though the burrows could have been nesting holes, they did not appear to be occupied by Storm-Petrels as would be expected in January if the nests were in current use. The examination, however, was superficial.

Phalacrocorax carbo (Linn.). *Black Cormorant*

One pair was seen on several occasions.

Ardea novaehollandiae Latham. *White-faced Heron*

Two birds were seen feeding on wave-washed rocks.

Cercopsis novaehollandiae Latham. *Cape Burren Goose*

Six birds were seen on Dorothee and two, perhaps from the same group, were seen and heard at day-break near the camp-site at Eastern Cove.

Haliaeetus leucogaster (Gmelin). *White-breasted Sea-Eagle*

Two birds were seen circling over Dorothee. An unoccupied nest was seen on the highest rocks off the peak on the southern portion of Dorothee, and another one on the southern section of Pearson Island.

* Department of Biochemistry, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, S. Aust. 5000.

Falco cenchroides Vigors and Horsfield. *Nankeen Kestrel*

Two birds were seen overhead near Hill 781 and two, possibly the same ones, overhead at Dorothee.

Haematopus fuliginosus Gould. *Sooty Oyster-Catcher*

Four adults and possibly two more were seen on Pearson Island and three adults, and a chick still unable to fly, on Dorothee. The adults were unusually timid and called frequently, possibly because they had non-flying chicks.

Arenaria interpres (Linn.). *Turnstone*

Eight birds were seen feeding on wave-washed rocks on the north section of Pearson Island.

Larus novaehollandiae Stephens. *Silver Gull*

Seen in groups of two and three, totalling perhaps a dozen on Pearson Island and a few more on Dorothee.

Larus pacificus Latham. *Pacific Gull*

At least two adults and two immature birds were seen on Pearson Island and two adults, probably another pair, on Dorothee.

Sterna bergii Lichtenstein. *Crested Tern*

Two birds were seen near Pearson Island and there were about a hundred resting on the rocks at the southern tip of Dorothee.

Sterna nereis (Gould). *Fairy Tern*

Two were seen fishing off the eastern bay of the north section of Pearson Island.

Neophema petrophila (Gould). *Rock Parrot*

There were a few small flocks in the vicinity of low bushes of *Atriplex*, *Olearia* and *Rhagodia* on the north section of Pearson Island. They appeared to be eating *Rhagodia* berries and were seen eating *Senecio* petals. There were a few birds on the south section and on Dorothee.

Melopsittacus undulatus (Shaw). *Budgerigah*

Two birds were seen on the north section of Pearson Island. During the spring of 1968, an unusually large number of these nomadic birds of inland Australia were seen in the southern part of South Australia including the vicinity of Adelaide. The presence of two on Pearson Island suggests that at least in the western part of the State some flocks had continued their southerly journey over the sea where the

chance of a landfall would be remote and numbers would have perished.

Apus pacificus (Latham). *Fork-tailed Swift*

At least twenty were seen hawking over the north peak of Dorothee on 11th January, 1969 at 11.00 a.m. The weather was fine with a northwesterly wind of about five knots and there was little change in this weather pattern during the day.

Hirundo tahitica Gmelin. *Pacific Swallow*

Next to the Silvereyes, this was probably the most common species on all the islands. Apart from the difficulty of getting anything resembling mud for nest-building, there seems no reason why they should not nest on these islands. Eckert (1971) found swallows' nests on Franklin Island (S.A.) made of fibrous material with no mud apparent, the nest site having been chosen to give natural support from below.

Epthianura albifrons (Jardine & Selby). *White-fronted Chat*

A few small flocks, each of about six birds, were seen feeding mainly in the area of salt-bush. Their numbers seemed small in comparison with the reports of previous expeditions. One immature bird still with conspicuous yellow gape, indicating that the species breeds on the island, was caught and banded.

Epthianura tricolor Gould. *Crimson Chat*

Five were seen on the northern slope of the north section of Pearson Island on three consecutive days. Some of these birds appeared immature and it is possible that the adults had bred on the island. One adult male was banded.

The spring of 1968 was noteworthy for the presence of Crimson Chats over the whole of the southern portion of the State, including Kangaroo Island. This species is rarely seen south of about latitude 30°S, and as with the Budgerigahs, its presence on Pearson and other islands, together with records of drowned Chats on beaches of St. Vincent Gulf, indicates that this southerly movement was continued in some cases over the sea.

Petroica godenovii (Vigors and Horsfield). *Red-capped Robin*

These were common amongst the *Casuarina* of the north section of Pearson Island. The birds were mostly uncoloured but one male in full plumage and one partly coloured bird were

seen. Two immature birds with conspicuous yellow gapes were banded. The presence of the latter indicates local breeding. This species was not seen on the south section of Pearson Island or on Dorothee, probably due to lack of trees.

Pachycephala pectoralis (Latham). *Golden Whistler*

One uncoloured bird was seen among the *Casuarina* on the northern slopes of the north section of Pearson Island. No calls were heard. These birds are usually easy to detect and some were seen on each of the earlier expeditions. This suggests that the number present on the islands has dwindled.

Zosterops lateralis (Latham). *Grey-backed Silvereye*

This was the most common bird in all areas including Dorothee. They were seen in flocks of about twenty, particularly in open areas of saltbush.

It is known from bird-banding recoveries that Silvereyes migrate from Tasmania to New South Wales and, in South Australia, from Kangaroo Island to Fleurieu Peninsula. Thus movement of these birds between the Pearson Islands and the mainland would not be unexpected.

Twelve birds were banded. These did not have the green back and yellow chin of the so-called Western Silvereye (subspecies *gouldii* Bonaparte) which extends from southern Western Australia along the coastal area eastwards to about Eucla, and did not differ significantly from the variety near Adelaide (subspecies *halmaturina* Campbell).

Meliphaga virescens (Vieillot). *Singing Honey-eater*

Only one bird was seen and no calls were heard. This bird is common on the adjacent mainland but has not yet been recorded from Flinders Island. It is widely distributed over much of South Australia, particularly in coastal areas and on other coastal islands. There seems no reason why it should not breed on Pearson Island as it is known to do so on Franklin Island. (Eckert 1971.)

Passer domesticus (Linn.). *House Sparrow*

Two sparrows were believed to have been seen in 1923 but none in 1960. However by 1969 a flock of about forty had established itself on the eastern point of the north section of Pearson Island, and a few more were on

Dorothee. It would be interesting to know if this were the result of a single or several different invasions of the islands. Sparrows are very common on Flinders Island and these might well act as a reservoir for the recolonisation of the Pearson Islands.

Sturnus vulgaris (Linn.). *European Starling*

Starlings were as numerous as Sparrows and they would probably be more difficult to eradicate. About twenty to thirty birds were seen at one time, but they were not in flocks. Many immature birds were present, one of which was banded. Probably they breed on the islands.

Artamus personatus (Gould). *Masked Wood-Swallow*

Only one bird was seen. Two were seen in 1923 and some in 1960. These are sociable birds and it would be expected that they would appear in small flocks rather than singly. They have been seen on Goose Island near Wardang Island in Spencer Gulf so their presence on an island is not unprecedented.

Corvus coronoides Vigor and Horsfield. *Australian Raven*

These were usually in pairs though sometimes as many as six might be seen feeding together on wave-washed debris on the rocks. Four more were seen on Dorothee. An old nest, probably of this species, was seen in a *Casuarina*. The species was distinguished from the Little Raven (*Corvus mellori* Matthews) by its call.

Discussion

Twenty-seven species of birds were seen on this expedition of which eight had not been reported previously. It is of interest to compare these with the birds recorded from Flinders Island, the nearest land 32 km (twenty miles) to the northeast. Flinders Island is an undulating limestone platform which has been cropped and grazed for many years so that there is little of the original flora left. Although it has been occupied by Europeans since 1870, records of birds are available for only three visits. The most comprehensive list is that of Eckert (1970) who recorded fifty-two species of birds of which twenty-six can be considered as land birds, compared with seventeen out of thirty-three for the Pearson Islands.

Two sea birds, namely the Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*) and the White-faced Storm-Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*) and four land birds, the Budgeryugh (*Melopsittacus undu-*

latus), the Fork-tailed Swift (*Apus pacificus*), the Singing Honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*) and the Masked Wood-Swallow (*Artamus personatus*) have been found on the Pearson Islands but not on Flinders Island, nor have they been recorded for the South Neptune Islands (Stirling & Shaughnessy 1970) but the Reef Heron, Fork-tailed Swift and Singing Honeyeater have been reported from the Franklin Islands (Eckert 1971). On the other hand, Pipits (*Anthus novaeseelandiae* (Gmelin) —syn. *Anthus australis*) and Spotted Scrub-Wrens (*Sericornis frontalis* [Vigors & Horsfield]), both of which are very common on Flinders Island and have also been recorded for the South Neptune Islands (Stirling & Shaughnessy 1970), have not been seen on the Pearson Islands.

Of the seventeen species of land birds recorded for the Pearson Islands, four are widely distributed over the State. These are the Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*), the White-fronted Chat (*Ephthianura albifrons*), the Singing Honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*) and the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*). The Rock Parrot (*Neophema petrophila*) is considered to be moderately sedentary and is found along most of the South Australian coast and off-shore islands where it breeds. It moves freely between these islands and the mainland. A favourite site for nesting is a limestone hole

or crevice behind over-hanging *Mesembrianthemum* or *Carpobrotus*, so they would be expected to breed on the Pearson Islands. The remaining twelve land birds are well-known migrants or are known to move long distances from time to time.

It may be concluded that the land birds of the Pearson Islands have all reached the islands during the normal movements of the species. They might just as easily move to Flinders Island or to the mainland, more particularly in the winter months, either by migration or by chance movements. A comprehensive bird-banding programme could give conclusive evidence of such movements. On this expedition, strong winds and the technical difficulties of erecting mistnets on stony ground resulted in only seventeen birds being banded.

The increase in numbers of the two exotic species, the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) is cause for concern. Some consideration should be given to the eradication of at least the Sparrows from the Pearson Islands.

Acknowledgements

Records from the 1960 visit were prepared by I. M. Thomas and S. J. Edmonds. Grants in support of the Expedition were made by the Department of Fisheries and Fauna Conservation and the Royal Society of South Australia.

References

- CLELAND, J. B. (1923).—The Flora and Fauna of the Nuyts Archipelago and the Investigator Group. No. 9.—The Birds of the Pearson Islands. *Trans. R. Soc. S. Aust.* **47**, 119-126.
- ECKERT, J. (1970).—Birds of the Investigator Group. *S. Aust. Orn.* **25**, 201-205.
- ECKERT, J. (1971).—Birds of the Franklin Islands and Eyre Island. South Australia. *Emu* **71**, 61-64.
- STIRLING, S. M. & SCHAUGHNESSY, G. (1970).—The Bird Fauna of the South Neptune Islands, South Australia. *Emu* **70**, 189-192.
- TWIDALE, C. R. (1971).—Pearson Island Expedition 1969.—2. Geomorphology. *Trans. R. Soc. S. Aust.* **95** (3), 123-130.

List of birds seen on the Pearson Islands.

	Sept. 1914	Nov. 1920	Jan. 1923	Jan. 1960	Jan. 1969
<i>Eudyptula minor</i> . Little Penguin	x	x	x	x	many
<i>Pelagodroma marina</i> . White-faced Storm-Petrel					10 dead
<i>Phaethon rubricauda</i> . Red-tailed Tropic-Bird			x		
<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> . Black Cormorant			x	x	2
<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i> . White-faced Heron			x		2
<i>Egretta sacra</i> . Reef Heron		x	x		
<i>Cereopsis novaehollandiae</i> . Cape Barren Goose	x	x	x	x	8
<i>Haliaetus leucogaster</i> . White-breasted Sea-Eagle			x		2
<i>Falco cenchroides</i> . Nankeen Kestrel			x		2
<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i> . Sooty Oyster-catcher	x		x	x	7
<i>Vanellus miles novaehollandiae</i> . Spur-winged Plover			x		
<i>Arenaria interpres</i> . Turnstone					8
<i>Calidris</i> sp. (? <i>ruficollis</i> , ? <i>alba</i>). Red-necked Stint or Sanderling				x	
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i> . Silver Gull		x	x	x	a few
<i>Larus pacificus</i> . Pacific Gull	x	x (nest)	x	x	6
<i>Sterna bergii</i> . Crested Tern		x	x	x	ca. 100
<i>Sterna nereis</i> . Fairy Tern					2
<i>Neophema petrophila</i> . Rock Parrot	x	x	x	x	many
<i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i> . Budgerygah					2
<i>Chrysococcyx basilis</i> . Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoo			x		
— Owl?			x?		
<i>Apus pacificus</i> . Fork-tailed Swift					ca. 20
<i>Hirundo tahitica</i> . Pacific Swallow			x	x	many
<i>Epthianura albifrons</i> . White-fronted Chat			x	x	?15-20
<i>Epthianura tricolor</i> . Crimson Chat					5
<i>Petroica goodenovii</i> . Red-capped Robin			x	x	many
<i>Pachycephala pectoralis</i> . Golden Whistler	x	x	x		1
<i>Zosterops lateralis</i> . Silvereye	x	x	x	x	many
<i>Meliphaga virescens</i> . Singing Honeyeater					1
<i>Passer domesticus</i> . House Sparrow			?2		ca. 40
<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> . European Starling			?small flock		ca. 50
<i>Artamus personatus</i> . Masked Wood-Swallow			x	x	1
<i>Corvus coronoides</i> . Australian Raven	x	x	x	x	8